



Wildlife Justice  
Commission

# Intelligence is a force multiplier

by Olivia Swaak-Goldman\*, Executive Director of the Wildlife Justice Commission

**Transnational criminal networks are a major factor in illegal wildlife trade. The application of intelligence analysis and advanced investigative techniques, along with international collaboration and coordination, are crucial to effectively disrupt criminal networks to secure the protection of elephants and other wildlife in the long-term.**

Intelligence analysis is an incredibly important force multiplier when resources are low and the problem is vast, as it allows for investigations to remain focussed on the greatest criminal threat. Therefore, intelligence must form part of any overarching strategy to tackle wildlife crime. The lack of both technical and human capacity is currently a major obstacle to the widespread use of intelligence analysis. Moreover, the wildlife crime global intelligence picture suffers from major gaps as a result of this lack of intelligence analysis. Tackling these lacunas is essential in ensuring the protection of Central African ecosystems. The Wildlife Justice Commission has vast experience in the use of intelligence to address wildlife crime and its experience may be instructive for others.

**IDU** The Wildlife Justice Commission has made intelligence analysis key to its strategy and created the infrastructure to facilitate this. The Wildlife Justice Commission's Intelligence Development Unit (IDU) is a fully functional team of criminal intelligence analysts with law enforcement backgrounds and is currently the largest team of analysts working on wildlife crime in any not-for-profit organisation. The IDU is internationally recognised for its high-quality data and analytical efforts. It intends to be a centre of excellence not only for intelligence analysis relating to wildlife crime, but also for upskilling external analysts and, through the outputs it produces, professionalising and promoting the use of intelligence and analysis to scale up its impact in this sector.

Over the last five years, the IDU has built up a wealth of information relevant to the current wildlife trafficking problem, which has a great value for both conservation and law enforcement circles. The Wildlife Justice Commission

has invested in the acquisition and retention of such data in its comprehensive intelligence database. This database, along with its dedicated data analysts, means that the Wildlife Justice Commission is in a unique position to generate meaningful insights on a regular basis and is frequently relied upon for its expertise.

Furthermore, the way the Wildlife Justice Commission operates puts it in a unique position to understand wildlife trafficking. It works in many countries that play an important role in the global trafficking of wildlife. The organisation currently has 24 active operations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, many of which are interconnected. The links between these operations could not have been discovered without the use of intelligence. While law enforcement agencies' jurisdictions often stop at their country's borders, crime does not. The IDU analyses crime on a transnational level to fill this intelligence gap, which is a necessary approach currently not undertaken by other relevant actors. Through the Wildlife Justice Commission's experience in supporting law enforcement



## WILDLIFE JUSTICE COMMISSION

The Wildlife Justice Commission was established in 2015 at the height of the African poaching crisis with the intention of holding criminals, and if need be governments, accountable for killing and selling wildlife. In an environment where intelligence was lacking, corruption was rife and where governments failed to cooperate, the Wildlife Justice Commission tasked itself with collecting actionable evidence with the view of convicting high level traffickers. In the first five years of its existence, the Wildlife Justice Commission helped to get more than 124 perpetrators arrested and stopped an untold number of elephants, pangolins, rhinos, tigers, turtles and other endangered species from being killed, maimed and trafficked. These successes are results

of the Wildlife Justice Commission's approach. It conducts intelligence-led investigations based on law enforcement methodology. The Wildlife Justice Commission shares intelligence reports, presents compelling evidence, builds law enforcement capabilities, and encourages further action in order to have governments do what is necessary to stop these crimes. The Wildlife Justice Commission can assist governments and other organisations in educating intelligence officers in the field of illegal wildlife trade.

*Wildlife Justice Commission's headquarters are based in The Hague, The Netherlands*  
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agencies, it became evident that intelligence analysis is necessary, yet a desperately under-resourced area in efforts to address wildlife crime. This has resulted in significant missed opportunities and a misallocation of resources. The ability of both law enforcement agencies and NGOs to meaningfully tackle wildlife crime is greatly limited without the use of intelligence. It is through this lens that wildlife trafficking in Central Africa should be tackled.

**CHINA** As Africa's largest trading partner, China's dominant influence in the Congo Basin and throughout Africa is undeniable. For decades, China has also been one of the main destinations of wildlife products from Africa. China's role in

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fighting the global illegal wildlife trade has a direct impact on preserving the biodiversity, forest communities and national economies of the countries in the Congo Basin.

China has long been one of the world's largest markets for ivory, however the domestic ivory trade within China officially came to an end as of 31 December 2017.<sup>1</sup> The country's total ban on the ivory trade is a milestone achievement in the history of elephant protection.

Right after the outbreak of Covid-19 in February 2020, China's legislature issued a resolution banning the nationwide sale and the consumption of all wild animals.<sup>2</sup> Since November 2020 China's Wildlife Protection Law has been under review, with public suggestions and comments being sought on its latest amendments. It is expected to come into effect in 2021.<sup>3</sup>

A series of legislative reforms are not the only measures China has taken. It is followed up and supported by effective, coordinated and intelligence-led law enforcement actions in China. In the first nine months of 2020, China prosecuted 15,154 people for wildlife-related crimes, up 66.2% from 2019, and of which 3,280 individuals were charged with illegal purchasing, selling, transporting, or smuggling endangered wild animals and the products made thereof.<sup>4</sup> A profound legislative basis combined with effective law enforcement is assessed to have had an impact on the criminal dynamics of illegal ivory trade. Indications of this include direct references from wildlife traffickers and traders now reluctant to trade raw ivory, and who are consequently stockpiling ivory in key countries along the supply chain, causing a steep decline in its street value.

**EQUATORIAL GUINEA** Taking a closer look at these law enforcement actions in China shows an interesting picture. Equatorial Guinea, one of the smallest nations in Africa, borders key source countries of elephant ivory and pangolins in the Congo Basin region. However, the country itself is rarely considered as a traditional source country of wildlife



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Seized shipment of illegal African elephant tusks, Thailand, 2012.

exportation from Africa to Asia. Previously, there have been minimal seizure data or criminal intelligence related to the illegal wildlife trade in Equatorial Guinea known to the Wildlife Justice Commission. However, an analysis on the database of Chinese courts judgements surprisingly revealed a rather consistent crime pattern, where Chinese nationals (often overseas workers) would smuggle pangolin scales and ivory products from Equatorial Guinea back to China. Between 2015 to 2020, 19 individuals who departed from Equatorial Guinea were arrested carrying approximately 570kg of pangolin scales and 25kg of ivory at various airports in China. All those 19 individuals boarded Ethiopian Airlines flights and transited in Addis Ababa.

Despite its small size, Equatorial Guinea tops all its neighbouring countries in terms of the total number of arrests concerning importing wildlife products to China between 2015 to 2020, in comparison with 13 cases from Nigeria, six cases from DR Congo, four cases from Rwanda, two cases from the Republic of Congo and one case from Cameroon. It is encouraging that Chinese law enforcements are taking effective actions to prevent wildlife being smuggled into the country from the Congo Basin

## The Intelligence Development Unit (IDU) of the Wildlife Justice Commission also upskills external analysts.

region, especially Equatorial Guinea. Meanwhile, the central question is yet to be answered: how can China's determination in fighting the illegal wildlife trade and the positive results garnered so far be translated into the preservation of the Central African forest and biodiversity?

#### AFRICA MAJOR HUB WILDLIFE TRAFFICKING

Our planet's wildlife is being decimated. According to a 2019 IPBES report on threats to biodiversity, the planet is at risk of losing more than one million species in the coming decade. Wildlife trafficking plays a major role in this destruction, driving many species towards extinction, as well as threatening global security and public health. Estimated to be worth between USD 7 - 23 billion<sup>5</sup> per year, it is a very lucrative form of crime. Wildlife trafficking also entails serious economic consequences. The World Bank estimates that the financial and economic consequences of transnational organised wildlife crime can amount to as much as USD 1 - 2 trillion per year.<sup>6</sup> Current efforts are not adequate to slow this down.

Africa is a major hub for such trafficking and many African countries are losing their national heritage at an alarming rate. Many species are endangered due to deforestation, habitat loss and poaching, amongst others. This concerns iconic species such as the African elephant and great apes, as well as lesser-known species such as the pangolins and endemic birds. This is very much the reality of Central African ecosystems.

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